

## TEACHING ESL TO SPANISH SPEAKERS

When teaching ESL to Spanish speakers there are a number of linguistic and social factors that should be considered in order to make this experience as positive as possible for both students and teachers.

### **Linguistic Factors**

The fact that English and Spanish share the same writing system makes teaching ESL to Spanish speakers a less challenging task. Most likely, students will be able to write in English from the very beginning. However, in the case of migrant workers, literacy is a concern and in a regular class some students might not know how to write in Spanish. Under such circumstances, students first need to learn the alphabet by copying isolated letters from the alphabet, practicing their sounds, and finally putting sounds together to form words both through oral, written, and reading exercises.

The English and Spanish alphabets are also very similar, thus students will not experience major difficulties identifying and recognizing letters from the English alphabet. However, this similarity may also cause problems in producing and identifying the following vowels: ‘a, e, and i.’ In Spanish the vowel ‘i’ is pronounced /i/, so Spanish speakers usually confuse the English vowel ‘e’ with ‘i’ because of the way it is pronounced in Spanish. When teaching the alphabet to Spanish speakers, it is very important to practice these vowels thoroughly over several classes to help students internalize their pronunciation in English. There may also be problems with the pronunciation of certain aspirated or vocalized consonants such as ‘b,’ ‘v,’ and ‘p.’ This problem along with other pronunciation issues are addressed in the Pronunciation lesson of this booklet.

While Spanish speakers do not have major difficulties with the writing the alphabet, they find English spelling to be “catastrophic” compared to Spanish spelling where each letter represents a single sound. In contrast, English spelling is full of inconsistencies. For example, sometimes the same sound is spelled using different letters, as in sea, see, scene, receive, and thief. The Alphabet and Pronunciation lesson in this booklet has an extensive list of similar examples.

English spelling is inadequate as a representation of the current speech sounds of American English. As a result, in discussing the sounds of English, a set of symbols to represent those sounds is needed. This set of symbols is called a Phonemic Transcription System. You may use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) or your own symbols for different sounds (even colors or other icons will do).

When trying to speak English, Spanish speakers experience many pronunciation problems due to the nonexistence of certain English sounds in the Spanish sound system, the lack of aspiration of certain sounds, the word position distribution of certain sounds in both English and Spanish, and the transfer of sounds from Spanish to English. The major pronunciation issues that Spanish speakers face are listed in the Pronunciation lesson of this booklet.

As for grammatical issues, English grammar is far less complex than Spanish, so it is unlikely that students will encounter major grammar difficulties at this early stage of language acquisition. However, the following grammar differences between English and Spanish are worth noting, especially when working with beginning students.

In Spanish the possessive pronouns refer to both the person that possesses something and the object, so the possessive pronoun agrees with the object in number. For example, '*su* hermano (his brother) and *sus* hermanos (his brothers).' In English the possessive pronouns only refer to the person who possesses something and do not agree with the object: *His* brother and *his* brothers.

Spanish speakers may also have trouble understanding that adjectives appear before the noun they modify in English as in 'the big house.' This difficulty is due to the fact that in Spanish adjectives appear after the noun they modify as in 'la casa grande' (the big house).' Also it needs to be pointed out to Spanish speakers that adjectives do not agree with the subject in number. This might be a good time to explain to students that English does not have a gender distinction like in Spanish.

Other problems that can be predicted include errors in the use of verbs in the third person singular form. For example, Spanish speakers tend to say 'he have' instead of 'he has' and 'he don't' instead of 'he doesn't.' They may also have problems with 'he' and 'she.' Finally, Spanish speakers may encounter difficulties with question structures, especially with the use of auxiliary verbs. For instance, Spanish speakers may say 'You live here?' instead of 'Do you live here?' Being aware of these possible problems is very important in order to help students with accuracy in the language.

## **Social Factors**

Since Latin Americans tend to be more group and family oriented than North Americans, Spanish speakers may also be concerned about keeping face by avoiding social conflict with members of their community. As a result, Spanish speakers tend to be polite and indirect in order to avoid conflict. For example, Spanish speakers may find it very difficult to disagree with someone or simply refuse an invitation or a request. Instead, Hispanics tend to use indirect ways of conveying their ideas and feelings. When living in the U.S., many Spanish speakers may be shocked by Americans' directness. This is something to keep in mind in order to understand students' behavior and interpretations of American culture.

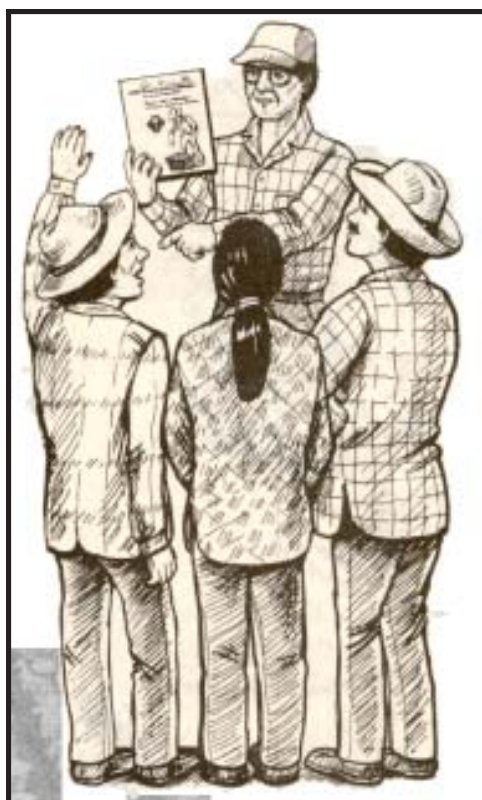
There are also differences in nonverbal communication between Latin America and North America. First, Spanish speakers tend to keep a very close physical proximity when interacting with others. While Americans feel that a certain personal space "bubble" has been violated if a stranger stands closer than twenty inches away, a typical member of a Latin American culture would feel that such a physical distance would be too big. Moreover, while touching in North American society signals a very personal and intimate register and relationship, touching is commonplace in Hispanic cultures. Along the same lines, Spanish speakers tend to kiss each other on the cheek when greeting friends, family, or even when meeting someone for the first time. You need to be mindful of such

differences in order to avoid miscommunication with your students and to create a positive teaching and learning environment.

Many of the social characteristics of Latin Americans are reflected in the classroom. For example, being from a culture that values social interaction with the members of the community, Spanish speakers tend to be very talkative in class. While having a group of talkative students is very positive, it might be hard for you to move on through a lesson when many students want to express themselves in English. This is also an indication that Spanish speakers tend to have a more auditory style (oral) when learning a language rather than a visual style. As a result, students will probably enjoy communicative oral activities rather than written ones.

Finally, because of the status of migrant workers in American society, these language learners may experience a great deal of isolation from mainstream American culture. As a result, they may not have many opportunities to practice using English in social interactions. This feeling of isolation may also make it very hard to learn the language and achieve an adequate level of proficiency. In addition, migrant workers may have no compelling reason to achieve mastery of the language since they have learned to get by without acquiring the correct forms. This phenomenon is referred to as fossilization and it is very common among migrant workers. Because fossilization may impede individuals from acquiring certain language forms, this booklet gives certain degree of attention to form to help students overcome language fossilization.

Keeping in mind these linguistic and social factors will enhance language teaching and learning in an environment where the majority of the students are Spanish speakers (SP).



Migrant Workers learning about pesticides.